

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Love yourself, BTS Army⁷: Participatory fandom and agency during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected societies not just through the threat it poses to human existence but also the sudden and seemingly lasting changes it has brought to people's lives. With restrictions imposed on human movement and social interactions, the resulting loneliness, isolation, and lack of agency has sustained negative impacts on mental health. On the other hand, the alternate resulting shift to digital forms of consumption and social relations also engendered new forms of coping with the pandemic, mainly through increased exposure to digital media and online social communities, including membership and participation in fandoms. Integrating Castell's network society theory and Jenkin's theory on participatory culture, this study considered the BTS ARMY fandom as an empowered community of fans who perform novel ways of coping through participatory agency and maintaining digital networks of social relations.

This paper is a mixed method exploratory study on the influence of the BTS Fandom on the mental health of female Filipino fans ($N = 104$, $M_{age} = 22.94$, $SD_{age} = 4.85$) during the time of pandemic. The Fandom Identity Scale constructed by Vinney, et al. in 2019 and the BBC Subjective Well-Being Scale developed and updated by Pontin, et al. in 2013 were used to evaluate the level of identification, participation, and well-being of official, unofficial, and non-affiliated female Filipino fans of BTS online, and supplemented by an open-ended qualitative questionnaire to provide a qualitative contextualization of their responses, particularly in relation to COVID-19. The results showed that fans belonging to official and unofficial fan clubs registered higher identification, participation, and well-being scores compared to non-affiliated fans, though statistical correlations showed no significant effects of fandom identification and participation to well-being. Qualitative data suggests that the identification and participation of female Filipino fans in the BTS ARMY fandom contributed significantly in their coping during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: participatory culture, fandom, BTS ARMY, network society, mental health

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Introduction and Problem Statement

This paper examined the effect of membership and participation in the BTS ARMY fandom on the mental well-being of female Filipino fans during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Applying mixed methods exploratory research, it sought to present a more nuanced perspective on the role of online fan cultures, particularly the fan experiences of female Filipinos, in mental health.

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic that started in March 2020 has, up to the time of this paper's writing, infected more than 246 million and caused death to more than 5 million people (Worldometer, 2021). In the Philippines, efforts to control the spread of the virus started with travel bans and restrictions which eventually advanced to an enhanced community quarantine for the most of the country (Tee, et al., 2020). The lockdown and other succeeding quarantine measures amounted to strict curfews, checkpoints, travel restrictions, suspension of public transportation, and a general temporary termination of all activity except essential services and industries (Santos, 2020). Mental health problems became an apparent consequence of these health protocols with the stay-at-home policies at the center cutting short plans, taking away opportunities, and exposing people to precarious conditions in terms of health, general safety, and economic security.

With the risk of contracting the virus and the stay-at-home policies in place, Filipinos turned to digital forms of entertainment and consumption as evidenced by the rapid increase in the popularity of Boy's Love series, Korean dramas, K-pop, and Pinoy pop in the country (Carreon, 2020; Lago, 2020; UP Korea Research Center, 2020). Although these cultural products already had significant followings before the pandemic, the lockdown created a more conducive environment and provided more time for their exploration (Baruah & Borborah, 2021, 182). Celebrities, who were similarly affected by the pandemic, exhibited an increased presence on social media and made efforts to provide comfort for their fans through music, online interactions, donations, and dissemination of health protocols online (YPulse, 2020; Swaminathan, 2020).

Among these celebrities was the South Korean idol group Bangtan Sonyeondan 방탄소년단 (BTS). Aside from donating \$1M to concert crews who were put out of work due to the pandemic (Rolli, 2020) and \$1M to Black Lives Matter (Johnson, 2020), they released their first all-English disco pop single Dynamite to "give fans a little bit of strength [against COVID-19]" (BTS Suga, as cited in Hong, 2020). The single has since obtained countless international awards and topped music charts all over the world. BTS RM, the leader of the group, pointed out that "There are a lot of different ways

that people overcome their depression and sadness in a difficult situation, but we chose a standard method. We felt that people needed a sense of happiness and hope that the familiar disco pop genre brings” (RM, as cited in Hong, 2020).

More than a distraction during the difficult time of crisis, digital media became an important avenue for information dissemination, online interactions and social relations; in general, a site of connectivity in the virtual world. Fandoms, organized fan communities of a certain idol group, sports team, people, or pop culture icons (Busse & Sandvoss, 2007, as cited in Reyes, et al., 2016) can be argued to be one of the prime products of this digital shift. Based on previous research, becoming a fan or engaging in “celebrity worship” leads to a decrease in quality of life and has been identified as an important factor that worsens one’s mental well-being (Maltby, et al., 2001). However, these findings have later been challenged by contemporary research revealing that in-group identification, social connections, and belongingness that fandoms provide actually become a buffer against the negative effects of celebrity worship (Reyes, et al., 2016; Reysen, et al., 2017; Safithri, et al., 2020; Swaminathan, 2020).

Fandom culture, particularly during our contemporary times, developed into an active participatory community where fans from all over the world interact with one another on a regular basis. A.R.M.Y. 아미 (commonly referred to as BTS ARMY), the fandom group supporting the Korean pop idol group BTS, is a prime example of this global interconnectedness. Dubbed by MTV in 2018 as the “world’s most powerful fandom,” BTS ARMY is estimated to have at least 48 million members based on the number of unique authors mentioning BTS online (Reid, 2020), making it one of the largest fandoms in the world. As a testament to the cooperation and unity of BTS ARMY, the fandom managed to match the \$1 million donation of BTS to the Black Lives Matter campaign in less than 24 hours (Iasimone, 2020). In the Philippines, fans of BTS have raised more than Php 3 million for the victims of Typhoon Ulysses as of November 16, 2020 and continuously engages in different campaigns for relief efforts, charity work, and environmentalism, among others (Hicap, 2020).

Amidst the crisis, this display of proactive engagement in fandoms contradicts the negative effects on mental health perceived in times of pandemic and natural disasters. The term mental resilience is understood in times of crisis as the ability to cope with distress and lack of control (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Contemporary research on fandoms show that, more than social connections and interactions, it is their participatory nature that is the greatest factor affecting their continued support and loyalty to their idols (Lee & Nguyen, 2020; Xiong, 2020). In response to the crippling

lack of control and agency imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, I argue that fandoms, where fan agency can be seen in their active participation in advocacies, streaming activities, and digital intimacy with idols, provide spaces where fans can gain and develop their mental resilience.

Mental Health and Culture

Prior to the global explosion of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental, neurological, and substance-use (MNS) disorders already constituted 13% of the global burden of disease with depression as the third leading contributor (Collins, et al., 2011). The World Health Organization (WHO) reported in 2019 that 800,000 people die from suicide each year with MNS disorders such as depression and substance abuse as a key factor. It is also important to note that the highest age-standardized suicide rates came from the South-East Asian region at 13.4 per 100,000 and also the lowest rate of decline at 4.2%. In research editorials, various epidemiologists and public health professionals expressed concerns on the potential (or possibly even current) increase in suicide rates as a result of global pandemics and their ill effects on people's mental health, citing evidence based on the rise of deaths by suicide during the SARS epidemic in 2003 (John, et al., 2020; Gunnell, et al., 2020; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020).

Pre-COVID mental health statistics reported that among adult Filipinos, 17-20% experience psychiatric disorders, while 10-15% of Filipino children suffer from mental health problems. Self and social stigma against seeking professional help, compounded by financial constraints and lack of access to services, are considered as key factors that worsen the mental health situation in the country and even among Filipinos overseas (Martinez, et al., 2020). However, several agents in the country, such as the Philippine Psychiatric Association, are exerting efforts through education and awareness campaigns to fight the stigma in the country (Kudva, et al., 2020). In 2017, the Philippine Mental Health Act (Republic Act no. 11036) was passed seeking to establish access to comprehensive and integrated mental health services and protect the rights of people with mental disorders and their family members, becoming the first legislation to combat the stigma. Despite this, the burden of access to and limitations in mental health services coupled with economic restrictions continue to be tall obstacles for mentally ill Filipinos seeking medical help (Lally, et al., 2019).

The serious effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health became apparent in the sudden spike in hotline calls regarding depression received by the National Center for Mental Health (NCMH) from 80 monthly calls pre-lockdown to 904 (Esguerra, 2020), with suicide-related calls peaking in July 2020 at 115 (CNN Philippines, 2020). In October 2020, a Department

of Health (DOH) executive in Region 9 cautioned that the pandemic has created a mental health crisis in the Philippines, citing the widespread unemployment and financial insecurity and the fear of the contagion experienced by the population as the main factors (Santiago, 2020). The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) also reported that deaths due to intentional self-harm increased by 25.7% in 2020 compared to the previous year (Mapa, 2021), likely as the result of the psychological strain of living through the pandemic. From a study conducted by Tee, et al. (2020) on the psychological impact of COVID-19 in the Philippines, it was inferred that among the respondents, one-fourth reported moderate-to-severe anxiety, one-seventh reported moderate-to-severe stress levels, and one-sixth reported moderate-to-severe depression, indicating factors such as the female gender, young age of 12-21 years, quarantine, prolonged stay at home, and feelings of being discriminated associated with greater psychological strain.

The effects of culture and society on mental health is largely recognized in psychology and particularly in mental health research in the concept of culture-bound syndromes, those illnesses which are “unique cultural products shaped by social contexts, or as locally shaped manifestations of a universal disease process (Hill & Fortenberry, 1992).” In the context of the Philippines and East and Southeast Asian countries, the stigma against mental disorders (Kudva, et al., 2020) and the supernatural, religious, and magical approaches to them (Lauber and Rösslerare, 2007) are the important local aspects that pose barriers to treatment. Studies have previously reported that the local understanding of mental illness in the Philippines is heavily stigmatized with pejorative terms such as *abnoy*, *siraulo*, and *baliw* (Kudva, et al., 2020), and is treated even in urban areas through traditional medicine (Ng, 1997). The interplay of stereotypes, values, meanings, and societal norms contribute largely to how mental illness is addressed, diagnosed, treated, and even ignored in a culture (Office of the US Surgeon General, 2001).

Public representations of mental illness in film and media stand at the fore of shaping and conditioning societal perceptions of mental health disorders, their experience, and the people experiencing them (Livingston, 2004). The visual culture of media particularly creates a visceral image of mental illness based on traditional and historical depictions that seek to define borders of “normality” through portrayals of the abnormal (Cross, 2004; Eisenhauer, 2008). Despite the possibility for recasting stereotypical and culturally-rooted images of mental illness, madness’s depiction in alternative cultural representations still falls prey to simple amelioration rather than mounting a complete challenge (Cross, 2004). Though an understanding of culture-bound syndromes is no longer new, research geared towards the relationship

between popular culture and mental health remains scant with most of them focused on how mental illness is depicted in the media.

Fan culture, a derivative and a supplement of popular media culture, has traditionally been viewed through a stigmatized and pathological lens similar to that of mental illness, but this view has recently been challenged in more contemporary research by illustrating the positive effect of fandom on mental health (Maltby, et al., 2001; Reyes, et al., 2016; Reysen, et al., 2017; Safithri, et al., 2020; Swaminathan, 2020). Technological developments in the form of the proliferation of social media access and use has been proven to be crucial elements behind this transformation by fostering the possibility of greater social connections, participation, and social action within fan culture (Reyes, et al., 2016; Reysen, et al., 2017, and Swaminathan, 2020). A recalibration of our understanding of mental health illness, to situate it within the rapidly evolving conditions of contemporary society, is necessary to go beyond the stigma and misconceptions surrounding it. One way of doing this is by addressing the relational gap between mental health and popular culture, a task taken on by BTS and other artists.

BTS ARMY Fandom: Ambassadors of Mental Health Awareness

Prior to the pandemic, social media was already one of the key factors behind BTS' worldwide popularity, as a platform breaking barriers to communication and facilitating cultural exchange, allowing them to reach their global ARMY at a speed never before conceived (Chang & Park, 2019; George, 2020; Irwansyah & Lestari, 2020; Saraswati & Nurbaiti, 2020; Xiong, 2020). BTS is part of a global cultural and economic phenomenon known as the *Hallyu* or Korean wave, a systematic and at the same time decentralized effort by the South Korean government and the private sector to promote and export Korean cultural products (Xiong, 2020). K-pop is considered a hybridized Korean cultural product that borrows from Japanese and Western styles of music entertainment. At the same time it is a distinctly "specific production style and culture surrounding South Korea's 'idol-making' industry" (George, 2020, 4).

While BTS is arguably the most successful Korean music act, they are unconventional compared to their contemporaries mostly because their management is a virtually unknown agency, Big Hit Entertainment (founded in 2005), that resurfaced after almost becoming bankrupt. They were outliers in a roster of idol groups produced by the Big Three production companies in K-pop: SM Entertainment (founded in 1995), YG Entertainment (founded in 1996), and JYP Entertainment (founded in 1997). They trained, groomed, and produced their own idol groups following a strict and specific formula for success. Unlike the Big Three, Big Hit allowed BTS to express themselves

and write their own songs about things that are important to them, and to be themselves.

BTS debuted on June 13, 2013 as an unusual group of young people singing, writing, and performing about the challenges experienced by their generation. In their first single “No More Dream” they questioned South Korean culture of authority and the youth’s deference to the elderly. The song critiques a system where the youth is defined, molded, and coerced into following the dreams and plans of adults without having any say about it (Cha, 2017). This is a message that they carry until the present and have sought to develop further. Over their more than seven-year career as artists, they have been vocal about their frustrations, insecurities, and anxieties as individual members of the group while integrating these experiences, feelings, and thoughts into their artistry (Blady, 2021). In May 18, 2018, BTS released their album *Love Yourself: Tear* and the song “Magic Shop,” which was partially inspired by a popular science self-help book *Into the Magic Shop: A Neurosurgeon’s Quest to Discover the Mysteries of the Brain and Secrets of the Heart* (2016) by neurosurgeon James R. Doty who wrote about “BTS comforting fans who are in pain while also saying how much the fans have helped them too” (lepacey, 2020). The subjectivities of BTS (then underdogs in K-pop) as artists who wrote their own songs and aspired to represent the youth, greatly contributed to their authenticity and relatability when they spoke about their own mental health challenges.

Beyond music, BTS has inspired ARMYs and people all over the world to learn to love themselves through a speech they delivered in front of the United Nations General Assembly on September 24, 2018. They spoke about their Love Myself campaign, a partnership with the #ENDviolence program of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) advocating for the protection of children from violence, and for an awareness of mental health issues (lepacey, 2020). In this speech, BTS leader Kim Namjun (RM) talked about the result of their Love Myself campaign and how their message inspired ARMY to love themselves and be responsible. “We have learned to love ourselves, so now I urge you to ‘speak yourself’” (RM, as cited in Lufadeju, 2020). According to Chang & Park (2019), this Love Yourself speech “is a stronger, more immediate, and more authentic message to young people than any philosopher’s speech” (279). The extent of the influence of this speech can further be seen in the intense social activism that ARMY and BTS has engaged in over the past few years.

Network Society and Participatory Cultures

Castells (2000, 2007, 2021) argued that network society is the social structure of our contemporary Information Age and described it as “the global web of horizontal communication networks that include the multimodal exchange of interactive messages from many to many both synchronous and asynchronous” (2007, 246). Although social networks already existed prior to the Information Age, Castells argued that social networks in network society are all pervasive and experienced globally through the convergence of the Internet, mobile phones, and most recently, 5G technology. Expounding on the growth of network society during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, Castells (2021) pronounced that “[i]n the last 10 years, internet-based social networks have become the platform of everything: of sociability, of literally, everything and all activities have been basically digitized. At the nucleus of every human activity, there is a digital network that connects to other digital networks.” Power and politics, according to Castells, has also shifted from media corporations and state governments who used to have a monopoly of mass media communication to a decentralized, global, and interactive media space where mass self-communication happens through the agency of the people (2007, 248), with social media networking and social movements online as prime examples. Citing several case studies, Castells (2007) expressed optimism towards the democratizing and empowering capacity of network society for the individual’s participation in resistances to dominant culture and movements for social change.

Although critical towards the influence of new technology on culture, Jenkin’s notion of participatory cultures fit within the framework of mass self-communication and digital networks that encourage participation and agency of the people. Participatory culture is “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (Jenkins, 2006, 3). There are four forms of participatory culture according to Jenkins (2006, 3): a) affiliation—the inclusion and sense of belongingness that a culture affords to its members through various forms of media; b) expressions—the creative participation and contributions of members, c) collaborative problem-solving—the collective effort and engagement of members in developing new knowledge; and d) circulations—dissemination of information that influences the flow of media. In applying this concept to fan cultures, Jenkins (2019) noted the capacity of fans engaging in participatory culture to utilize their voices in mobilizing for social justice and political change. Fandom cultures, as porous communities of likeminded

individuals working together for a common goal of supporting the idols, exhibit most, if not all, of the forms of participatory culture, and they clearly exist within the framework of Castells' network society.

Methodology

This study utilized a mixed method exploratory design consisting of a three-scale quantitative survey that sought to measure the fan identification, participation in the fandom, and subjective well-being of one hundred four (104) female Filipino fans of BTS; and a qualitative open-ended survey that aimed to describe and interpret the activities and practices of BTS ARMYs online in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and to examine the effects of fan participation on the mental health and overall well-being of BTS ARMYs. The quantitative survey used the following scales:

- **Fan Identity Scale (FIS):** The Fan Identity Scale designed by Vinney, et al. (2019) is a 9-item scale seeking to provide a multidimensional measure (Enthusiasm, Appreciation, and Social Interaction) of fan identity that is not constrained by the pathological and clinical perspectives on fan behavior. For the purpose of this paper, the scale was modified to specifically address the BTS fandom replacing the general "favourite television show or movie" in the original scale. The FIS had a Cronbach's alpha of .87 (standardized = .89, n = 104) in the present study.
- **Participatory Scale:** Current research on BTS fandom often cites the participatory nature of K-pop fandom compared to the less engaged and less interactive fan cultures in Western pop culture (Roche, 2019; Lee & Nguyen, 2020; Xiong, 2020). With this in mind, the research included the following subscale from the original 54-item, 7 factor scale used in the development of the FIS. The subscale was modified to address the BTS fandom instead of the original general "favourite television show or movie" in the FIS. One item pertaining to "dressing up as a character from my favourite television show or movie" was modified to "dressing up following the fashion style of one of the BTS members." In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the participatory scale was .8 (standardized = .82, n = 104).
- **BBC Subjective Well-Being Scale (BBC-SWB):** The BBC Subjective Well-Being Scale designed by Pontin, et al. (2013) is a modified version using a 5-point Likert scale of the original 24-item, 4-point Likert scale BBC Well-Being Scale designed by Schwannauer, et al. (2011). Item number 4 is reverse-scored and was duly adjusted in the computation. The present study yielded a .94 Cronbach's alpha (standardized = .94, n = 104) for the BBC-SWB scale.

Sampling

The study used a snowball sampling method due to the lack of an existing sampling frame for the (Filipino) BTS ARMY population, the networked nature of fan cultures, the difficulty of obtaining access to certain fan groups/communities, and the perception of fan communities as subcultures that can be considered as vulnerable populations due to stigma, stereotypes, and the pathological perspective on their practices.

The respondents needed to fulfill three requirements to become a participant in the study:

- Must be Filipino;
- Must identify as a fan of BTS;
- and must at least be 18 years of age.

Data Gathering

The participants were 104 female Filipino fans of BTS from various social media platforms online, whose ages ranged from 18 to 46 years ($M = 22.94$, $SD = 4.85$). Data collection was done online through multiple social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Amino, and Messenger) from November 29 to December 13, 2020. Initially, the study hoped to obtain equal responses between male and female fans but an overwhelming majority of the respondents who answered the survey were female.

Data Analysis

The study performed a correlational analysis across the different scales used to determine the strength of the relationship between fan identification and participation and the subjective well-being of the fans. It examined the responses from the open-ended survey through grounded theory using open, axial, and selective coding techniques following the structure of the questionnaire:

- The story behind the fans' introduction, identification, and participation in the BTS ARMY fandom.
- The experience and coping of the fans during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The effects of BTS ARMY on fans' mental health.

Hypothesis

Following the network society and participatory culture theory, this paper predicted that members of fanclubs (official or unofficial) through their social involvement and expanded networks in these communities shall

obtain better scores for their subjective well-being compared to fans who are not affiliated with any fanclub.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a preliminary analysis, Table 1 presents the total mean and standard deviation for all the variables in the total and subsets of the population. The total yielded a mean of 41.84 (SD = 4.26) for the FIS, 43.57 (SD = 8.06) for the Participatory scale, and 85.98 (SD = 16.98) for the BBC-SWB scale. Results yielded from the 18-22 age group (n = 55) registered high scores on all scales along with those from the 35-46 age group (n = 3). Year started in the fandom yielded consistent high scores on all scales for 2013, 2018, 2019, and 2020, except for 2019 obtaining lower scores in the FIS and participatory scales. ARMY fan identification (FIS) and participation (Participatory) were notably higher for those belonging to both official and unofficial fanclubs/groups. It is also worth noting that for the BBC-SWB scale, those belonging to unofficial fan clubs registered better scores than those who were non-unofficial fans, whereas those belonging to official fan clubs delivered lower scores than those who were non-official fans.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics across all variables in subsets of the population

	n	Fan Identity Scale	Participatory Scale	BBC Well-Being Scale
		M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
TOTAL	104	41.84 (4.26)	43.57 (8.06)	85.98 (16.98)
Age				
18-22	55	42.11 (2.80)	44.33 (7.58)	86.34 (16.63)
23-27	36	41.28 (5.67)	42.83 (8.79)	84.69 (14.86)
28-34	10	41.70 (5.60)	40.70 (8.10)	83.70 (25.50)
35-46	3	44.00 (1.73)	49.25 (6.93)	89.25 (11.02)
Year Started in the Fandom				
2020	29	42.34 (4.65)	41.62 (7.42)	91.83 (16.24)
2019	10	40.50 (5.50)	39.40 (7.24)	89.20 (17.34)
2018	13	42.77 (2.83)	47.77 (6.82)	92.61 (14.29)
2017	18	41.06 (5.05)	42.11 (8.76)	81.00 (9.200)
2016	17	41.47 (4.16)	46.65 (8.20)	74.41 (20.10)

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		Fan Identity Scale	Participatory Scale	BBC Well-Being Scale
2015	8	41.12 (2.95)	45.00 (7.71)	86.75 (17.60)
2014	5	43.00 (3.08)	44.40 (8.20)	82.60 (13.99)
2013	4	43.50 (1.91)	44.0 (10.23)	88.25 (23.01)
Bias				
All members equally (OT7)	38	42.74 (3.05)	45.03 (8.28)	83.45 (17.46)
Kim Namjun (RM)	7	38.71 (6.55)	42.9 (11.82)	82.57 (13.56)
Kim Seokjin (Jin)	11	40.00 (6.23)	40.91 (5.86)	91.27 (16.42)
Min Yoongi (SUGA)	11	41.64 (4.57)	42.45 (8.79)	86.63 (17.30)
Jung Hoseok (j-hope)	2	42.00 (1.41)	32.00 (5.66)	103.0 (12.73)
Park Jimin (Jimin)	9	40.33 (6.24)	42.56 (8.78)	84.67 (13.72)
Kim Taehyung (V)	17	42.88 (2.57)	45.53 (5.76)	90.00 (19.53)
Jeon Jeongguk (Jungkook)	9	42.44 (2.96)	42.44 (7.80)	82.00 (16.54)
Official Membership				
Yes	27	44.07 (1.90)	49.04 (7.41)	85.89 (16.46)
No	77	41.05 (4.57)	41.65 (7.40)	86.01 (17.26)
Unofficial Membership				
Yes	46	42.43 (3.72)	46.72 (7.83)	89.67 (16.65)
No	58	41.36 (4.61)	41.07 (7.38)	83.05 (16.80)

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		Fan Identity Scale	Participatory Scale	BBC Well-Being Scale
Social Media Used				
Twitter	98	42.28 (3.58)	44.09 (7.93)	85.93 (17.01)
Youtube	89	42.13 (4.05)	44.47 (7.91)	86.10 (17.98)
Weverse	85	42.98 (2.76)	44.62 (7.55)	85.69 (16.68)
Vlive	81	42.51 (3.16)	44.41 (7.57)	85.68 (17.70)
Instagram	78	42.23 (3.82)	45.33 (7.73)	85.69 (17.18)
Facebook	75	41.99 (4.25)	44.63 (8.25)	87.24 (16.70)
Tiktok	24	43.79 (1.89)	48.79 (8.11)	83.13 (22.50)
Tumblr	13	43.54 (1.90)	41.69 (6.66)	83.00 (13.97)
Reddit	7	43.71 (1.50)	45.43 (6.45)	95.14 (18.87)

Combining the subsets for fanclub membership, Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation for the all four groups on all variables. For fan identity, belonging solely to an official fanclub (ON) yielded the highest score followed by belonging to both official and unofficial fanclubs (OU), belonging solely to an unofficial fanclub (UN), and belonging to none (NN), respectively. This indicates that inclusion in official fanclubs translates to a higher sense of identification with the fandom, which might be explained through the higher investment in terms of time, effort and even monetary costs as membership in official clubs require annual membership fees. For the fan participation, OU yielded the highest score followed by ON, UN, and NN, respectively. For fan well-being UN yielded the highest score followed by ON, OU, and NN, respectively.

Table 2. Means & Standard Deviations for all four groups on all variables

	FIS Total	
	Official Fan	Non-Official Fan
Unofficial Fan	43.75(2.38)	41.73(4.13)
Non-Unofficial Fan	44.54(0.69)	40.62(4.82)
	Participatory Total	
	Official Fan	Non-Official Fan
Unofficial Fan	50(8.16)	44.97(7.18)
Non-Unofficial Fan	47.64(6.26)	39.53(6.80)
	BBC-SWB Total	

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	FIS Total	
	Official Fan	Non-Official Fan
Unofficial Fan	86.81(19.11)	91.2(15.30)
Non-Unofficial Fan	84.54(12.36)	82.70(17.77)

The total FIS scores correlated moderately with the Participatory scale ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$) indicating significant convergent validity. FIS and the Participatory scale correlated moderately for OU ($r = 0.36$, $p = 0.17$), ON ($r = 0.46$, $p = 0.15$), and UN ($r = 0.32$, $p = 0.08$) but only NN ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$) was statistically significant. The total FIS scores correlated very weakly with the BBC-SWB scale ($r = 0.07$, $p = 0.7679$) without statistical significance. FIS and BBC-SWB scale correlated weakly for UN ($r = 0.25$, $p = 0.18$) and NN ($r = 0.11$, $p = 0.44$) and negatively correlated weakly for OU ($r = -0.12$, $p = 0.17$) and ON ($r = -0.37$, $p = 0.26$), with none of them being statistically significant.

Table 3. Spearman's rank correlation for all measures for the total population

Measures	Fan Identity Scale	Participatory Scale
Participatory Scale	0.4746183 $p = 3.579e-07$	
BBC Subjective Well-Being Scale	0.0737363 $p = 0.7679$	0.02928519 $p = 0.7679$

The total FIS scores on the Enthusiasm, Appreciation, Social Interaction, and Participatory subscales correlated significantly with each other and registered p values < 0.01 , indicating strong convergent validity and statistical significance. The total BBC-SWB scores on the Psychological, Physical, and Relational subscales similarly correlated significantly with each other and registered p values < 0.01 , indicating strong convergent validity and statistical significance. None of the correlations between the FIS subscales and BBC-SWB subscales indicated statistically significant results with only Enthusiasm and Psychological ($r = 0.17$, $p = 0.088$), Enthusiasm and Physical ($r = 0.19$, $p = 0.054$), and Appreciation and Physical ($r = 0.19$, $p = 0.054$) registering marginally significant p values.

Table 4 Spearman's rank correlation for all subscales for the total population

Subscales	Enthusiasm	Appreciation	Social Interaction	Participatory	Psychological	Physical
Appreciation	0.7598379					

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Subscales	Enthusiasm	Appreciation	Social Interaction	Participation	Psychological	Physical
	p < 2.2e-16					
Social Interaction	0.356548	0.2928519				
	p = 0.0002032		p = 0.002554			
Participation	0.4877751	0.4579146	0.315004			
	p = 1.506e-07		p = 1.021e-06		p = 0.001126	
Psychological	0.1682989	0.1575324	-0.1575909	0.008512026		
	p = 0.08768		p = 0.1102		p = 0.1101	
Physical	0.1897304	0.1893199	-0.1448717	0.04845275	0.8076344	
	p = 0.05372		p = 0.05425		p = 0.1423	
Relational	0.07966878	0.01940037	0.02572482	0.1000812	0.5943478	0.5745744
	p = 0.4214		p = 0.845		p = 0.7955	
			p = 0.3121		p = 2.903e-11	
					p = 1.797e-10	

This study proposed to determine the role of membership in the BTS ARMY fandom on the mental well-being of fans during the time of pandemic, and to test whether there is indeed a positive relationship between fans' identification with and participation in their fandom and their well-being. While mean scores were higher for ARMYs belonging to official and unofficial fan clubs in comparison to those who were non-affiliated to fanclubs, no direct relationship was established due to the lack of statistically significant correlation among the variables. Thus, the hypothesis could not be supported by evidence. The inability to draw significant correlation among the variables can be attributed to the following reasons: a) the volatility in the well-being scores of the respondents can be seen as an effect of the extraordinary conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic contributing factors that negatively and likewise positively affect mental health; b) the ambiguity of the experience of ARMYs in relation to the fandom and other fans, and c) the incompatibility of the FIS scale in measuring fan identity beyond its primary base of film and TV show fans. The qualitative interview data that follows reflected these reasons:

1. Becoming a Fan of BTS: How were you introduced to BTS?

The experience of the lockdown during the pandemic brought the majority of respondents to BTS due to the trend of moving social relations

and interactions online. It is no wonder that among the participant ARMYs, 27.88% became fans only during 2020 with almost all of them starting after the lockdown was imposed. Some of them who were already aware of BTS pre-pandemic became ARMY only during the lockdown. This can be explained by the highly relational and digital origins of their introduction to BTS, mostly through friend and family recommendations, as a way of spending time at home and through a chance encounter on YouTube in times of boredom. This is a quintessential example of how prevalent mass self-communication was during the pandemic. Among the responses, these few examples¹ stood out:

- 1) My younger sister is an ARMY so I've actually been exposed to BTS content for the longest time. I listen to their music casually too. I just labeled myself as ARMY after being able to acquaint myself with all their content (i.e. concert DVDs, VLIVE vids, Bangtan Bombs, etc) because I thought it was more... courteous that way.
- 2) My friend introduced me to them and tried to get me to be a fan of them for a year but I didn't cave in until we had a sleepover she showed me a bunch of videos of BTS and she explained to me the messages of their songs and their messages of the band as well. By the day after our sleepover, my youtube history was full of BTS videos and I haven't stopped listening to their discography by then and my camera roll was starting to pile up with pictures and videos of them
- 3) I first saw them trending for BST and watched their video but did not really think too much about it. It was only until my best friend sent me a link to the Spring Day MV that I decided I kinda liked them. She quizzed me on their names and I felt pressured so I watched intro videos to get to know them.
- 4) Listened to a song of theirs, found a video of them online, and down the rabbit hole I go. A friend is also a fan, so that helped pull me in quickly.

¹ These verbatim quotes were taken from the actual survey responses, without alteration in their spelling, syntax, and grammar. Parts with [...] indicate that the statements were clipped from a longer passage. Italicized parts are the English translations.

- 5) Falling into the BTS rabbit hole curated by Youtube's algorithm
- 6) i've known them already around dope or fire era but i wasn't really interested at that time yet but eventually at some point, i became curious, so i watched a video of them in youtube and then, *tada* i fell deep 🙌

YouTube, as the leading video streaming platform today, stood out as the main avenue for exposure to BTS with more than half of the respondents citing it as their entry point into the BTS fandom through various forms of content from music videos, dance practice videos, fan edits/compilations, and the groups' guest performance/appearance in American award shows and late night shows. Quotes numbers 4, 5, and 6 described the experience as a kind of "falling down the rabbit hole" indicating a sense of being transported into a different state of reality, something that is reflected later with how the fans related their experience as fans of BTS. Most notably, there is a high frequency of responses citing "BTS Carpool Karaoke," a YouTube video of a February 25, 2020 telecast of The Late Late Show with James Corden (2015 -) where BTS was invited as a guest, and "Dynamite," the YouTube music video of the first all-English disco pop single of BTS released in August 21, 2020 dedicated to provide a sense of happiness and hope during the pandemic, as their first encounter with the group:

- 7) I randomly chanced upon their Carpool video this Feb, then I watched their music videos, then next thing I know, I've been binge watching their compilations videos on Youtube
- 8) I saw their Carpool Karaoke in the Late Late Show with James Corden and from then on, I started to dig for more videos. Then created a stan twitter which helped me know more about them.
- 9) Through youtube (BTS carpool karaoke with James Corden)
- 10) Gusto kong malaman ang kanilang mga pangalan kaya pinanood ko ang carpool karaoke. Sunod, gusto kong makilala ang kanilang mga mukha kaya nanood pa ako ng maraming bidyo hanggang sa naadik ako. (*I wanted to know their names so I watched Carpool Karaoke. I then wanted to know their faces so I watched more videos until I was addicted.*)


The BTS phenomenon, the burgeoning and rapid expansion of the BTS ARMY fandom, has often been explained as a success in media marketing and strategy with the highly interactional and intimate online activities of the idol group as the main catalyst. The responses reflected this reality as most, if not all, of them were introduced to the group not only through physical networks of social relationships but also through digital media consumption and widespread internet algorithms that intersected with BTS ARMY content on YouTube, social media, and other platforms. Despite these factors contributing to the encounter between BTS and ARMY, some participants still note that they “found them [at] the time [they] need [BTS] the most,” a sentiment that is echoed later on in the next sections.

2. *Being a Fan of BTS: Why are you an ARMY or a fan of BTS?*

Although there were various of reasons for being an ARMY or a fan of BTS, the majority of the responses indicated a similar initial reason for supporting the group which was mainly their music and the message they conveyed, especially the “kind of comfort, happiness, and healing” their art brought not just to the fans but also to everyone. More than their charm and talent, BTS and their music, according to some of the participants, became their safe space and comfort in times when they did not have anyone or anywhere to run to, like a real friend who they could always relate to and who was always there for them. Here are some of the participants’ answers:

- 11) Their artistry, especially in music, is what had initially pulled me in to become a fan. They have taught me how to love myself more and become more passionate as an artist myself. I am also an army because BTS is a safe space that I can always return to, and their love and dedication to army is what keeps me going. BTS is an inspiration in all that they do, and they not only show this through music, but their actions as well. They have also spoken about things beyond music, and they are genuine in their actions. They not only are talented, but they are good people.
- 12) I became an army solely because of the message they put out to their fans or even casual listeners. Even though I’m not yet there, I started loving myself more and more each day which is a progress for me because it’s difficult. I’m more optimistic with the choices I make and feel complete with the friends I’ve made along the way because of BTS. They taught me things

I wouldn't have known even just with my family life and I'm very grateful for them and their music.

- 13) I love how they are real, genuine people who help Army be a better version of themselves and love themselves. I admire how they advocate good causes and support them. More than their looks and talents, it is their golden hearts that got me into this fandom. I am not that into KPop, but BTS proved that language should never be a barrier to create a relationship with their fans, Armys. Their music inspires me everyday 
- 14) BTS is not just an ordinary music group. Aside from the great music the band produces, I mostly became an ARMY because of the message and the values these boys have and they want to extend to their fans. As I am also concerned about today's youth, I am amazed of how these seven young men conduct their music life to reach people of their same age, and even people of all ages. BTS's music is healing and gives a lot of comfort.

Despite being isolated from one another geographically due to the lockdown, the fans felt that BTS was with them throughout the pandemic, through their music, live videos, tweets, pictures, and even the mere thought of them. More than understanding the concerns of the current generation, BTS listened to ARMY and bared their hearts as plain humans to their fans, and shared their own bouts with depression, stress, and anxiety despite coming from a culture that highly stigmatized mental illness.

- 15) Because they don't make music about girls or love life. They use their music and platform to talk about self love, mental health and social issues.
- 16) Their songs talk about mental health and representation of youth and being heard and all things that the youth go through and experience in a daily basis and with that, I feel heard and I feel like someone out there understands me and hears what I'm saying and what I go through. [...]
- 17) I don't just love them for what they do for me personally, but for the messages they convey in their music overall. I love that they're personally involved

in the art that they make. They were brave enough to debut as a group that criticized social issues in Korea through music, and up to now they still address important issues like mental health, self-love, and even the ongoing pandemic. [...]

The unique position of BTS as artists who were vocal about their own mental health issues, social justice advocacies, and even self-love, touched the lives of fans who viewed the members as “real,” “genuine,” and “authentic” people just like themselves. These “good people” also set a kind of inspiration for ARMYs to be better people by following their idols’ actions and contributing to the good of society through various projects and just by simply trying to practice BTS’ “love yourself” message.

- 18) They never forget to thank their fans and you can see how genuine they are in communicating with their fans and making the effort to make sure that they are heard and they feel loved.
- 19) They know how to connect and to relate with their fans. They don't treat us as fans, they treat us as family — the way they treat themselves as one family. :)
- 20) You might not be able to understand why armys love bts so much but once you try to listen to what bts is saying istg you'll love them too. Also armys and bts love for each other is unexplainable, the relationship that armys and bts have is beyond eternity.
- 21) because they keep me happy and they gave me more purpose to live and enjoy life. also because i love their personalities so much that i feel like we've known each other for years. there's really a deep connection with them since then. :)
- 22) [...] I also LOVE how they genuinely care about each other like a real family. And I love them because they're just as much of a fan of ARMYs as we are fans of them.

Apart from their music, genuine personality, and inspiring advocacies, BTS also maintained a “deep connection” to each other and to the ARMYs, where expressions and acts of love going both ways were common and felt. The members never forgot to thank their fans, genuinely appreciate their effort, and make sure that they were heard and loved. The participants’ appreciation for the group’s sense of authenticity and rapport with the

fans can also be attributed to the groups' high digital social engagement with ARMY through their tweets, Instagram posts, and other social media updates on their daily lives, preoccupations, and critique of their own work (Lee & Nguyen, 2020). This is apparent in the responses of fans particularly in the number of social media applications they used for staying updated and connected to the BTS ARMY fandom. The top apps providing the highest levels of interaction between the group and the fans were Twitter (94.23%), YouTube (85.58%), Weverse (81.73%), and Vlive (77.88%). These digital networks of intimacy allowed for comfort, happiness, and healing to be conveyed and received across miles in the physical realm and create imagined yet profound connections that acted as safe spaces for ARMYs online.

3. *Participating as a Fan of BTS: How involved are you with the fandom and what activities do you engage in as a member of the BTS fandom?*

Fan participation in an online fandom can take a myriad of forms and different levels of engagement. The responses to this question exhibited existing tensions between fandom life and the personal/professional life of the fans, the conscious negotiations they made to resolve these conflicts, and their unique and diverse ways of supporting BTS. Listening to BTS music, consuming content related to them, and keeping up with some of the updates on the group over different social media platforms were the most common forms of activity, serving as the bare minimum in terms of participation, that the participants cited in their responses..

- 23) None. I am not active recently. But, I do view their weverse
- 24) Wala pa. Hindi ako masyado nakakahalubilo pero masaya ko tuwing nakakapanuod ng vids at nakakabasa ng updates sa kanila (*None yet. I do not socialize that much but I am happy every time I watch videos and read updates about them [BTS]*)
- 25) I am not that active, checking pages just to be updated with recent happenings and to buy merch
- 26) Very involved, I'm updated with all the latest news.
- 27) I use Twitter and Weverse to stay connected and updates with the latest news. I vote for BTS for different award shows and talk to fans from all around the world on those platforms.
- 28) Hindi ako active. Masyadong toxic ang fandom, basta susuportahan ko lagi ang BTS sa kahit ano mang path

ang piliin nila in the future (*I'm not active. The fandom is too toxic, I will just support BTS on whatever path they will choose in the future*)

Those who considered themselves inactive gave as key reasons behind their reduced involvement the “toxic” or “aggressive” behavior of other ARMYs online and being occupied with one’s personal and professional life. Some participants were also conscious of the time they spent in fandom and openly shared about how they managed to keep it within healthy terms.

- 29) I was active when I was JHS and SHS but not much now in college because I am busy.
- 30) I only share their activities online but I do not engage with fellow army coz (1) I am an adult with freelance job and currently studying for masters(2) the fandom consists of generally “aggressive” individuals
- 31) I do music video streaming but not to the point where I sacrifice my sleep, and etc. I also listen to their music in different platforms but only if I want to. Lastly, I purchase albums but if it has different versions, I only get 1.
- 32) I'd say I'm somewhere in the middle. I keep myself updated, but I don't engage in any personal or petty war. I promote their content, I vote for them in award shows, and I still introduce them to my friends who are interested to know more about other artists
- 33) I'm active in the sense I make fanart for them and actively stream their content. I've been wanting to donate to the several charities they have here in the Philippines but I don't have much spare money to give but they also inspire me to give so they are one of the reasons I decided to open art commissions for victims of the recent typhoon wherever I can.

On the other hand, active fans reported creating a “stan account,” interacting with and checking on other ARMYs, disseminating BTS content and ways to vote for them in award shows, streaming the group’s latest releases, collecting BTS merchandise, working on birthday projects for the members, raising awareness for social justice campaigns, and conducting online activism through petitions and donation drives. Additionally, they contributed to the fandom through creative works such as fanfictions, art,

edits, content, and fan-made merchandise. The following quote encompasses the majority of these activities and provides critical examples:

34.) I'm involved in the fandom through twitter. I have a Stan account and have made friends with other ARMYs. Often times you'll see a moot calling for help or talking about having a bad day and I message them personally to ask them how they're doing. I belong in a gc for ARMYs dealing with depression although the group is not as active now as it once was. On twitter, we disseminate ways to vote the boys on award shows and ways to stream their music so that they chart and reach more people. We also use our fan accounts as platforms to raise awareness on social issues that are important to us and gather donations or signatures for petitions to help out causes that speak to us. I regularly donate to One In An Army, one of our biggest Fan Accounts responsible for organising donation drives for different causes. I participate on birthday projects related to raising funds for charities or activities like food drives or tree-planting to celebrate the birthday of the members (The causes vary according to which ones are close to the heart of the member whose birthday it is. We look at where they donate or what they speak about and focus our energy into raising awareness for those causes on their birthday month). I've benefited from some lessons from ARMY Languages (ARMY acc composed of ARMY who speak different languages and are willing to teach to others) and I also follow an ARMY Book Club.

4. Effect of the Pandemic: How did the coronavirus pandemic affect your life?

The coronavirus pandemic generally affected the participants negatively, with increased anxiety and depression being cited most frequently in their responses. The lockdown-induced isolation, lack of control over the situation, cancelled plans, loneliness from being apart, uncertainty over everything, financial insecurity, and the difficult adjustments and exhaustion borne out of the shift to online learning and work were the key causes of the fans' deteriorating mental health during the pandemic.

- 35) It definitely took a toll on me especially my mental health. I was ripped out of my daily activities and everything stopped for awhile. My future was uncertain, I was scared of the whole situation and I was away from my friends. For awhile I thought that there was nothing that I could look forward to, there was just uncertainty and even until now I still feel that.
- 36) I struggled with the lockdown and working from home while feeling helpless about all the things going on that I can't control. Although, I am aware of my privilege and live a fairly comfortable life, so definitely not as much affected as other people. Few breakdowns. My ADHD and Bipolar spiked.
- 37) Parang tumigil yung oras. Minsan di ko na namamalayan kung anong oras o araw na. Its a never ending cycle that seems like it has no end. *(It's like time stopped. Sometimes, I no longer notice what time and date it is...)*
- 38) As the number of cases went up and the possibility of going back to our normal daily lives has become bleak my anxiety also grew.
- 39) It made me feel the fear of being on public. I lost interest in things because I wasn't able to live my life fully. I'm having a hard time collecting thoughts (in school and personally).

The fear of contracting the virus, negative media reporting, and appalling socio-political events and issues compounded the sense of helplessness they felt. For some of them, the repercussions of the lockdown resulted in a number of unhealthy habits, including constant negative thoughts, despair, anger, boredom, and inactivity. They also felt constant worry for family members, especially those who were immunocompromised. This is tied to efforts to move from urban centers to the provinces where the virus was less prevalent despite the need to leave or be separated from other family members who are breadwinners. For a few participants, the pandemic opened several opportunities to reassess the narrow view of the health crisis as a solely negative event.

- 40) [...] On the other hand, it gave me a little breather. I got a chance to discover myself even more. And since I have more time sa sarili, I became less busy with my

faves and with what I longed to do for myself while I stayed at home.

- 41) It helped me realize a few things about myself and the people around me. I tried new things that I didn't know I would be able to.
- 42) It made me realise that there are tons of limitations and discipline that i should practice which i normally don't do before the pandemic started.

5. Coping with the Pandemic: How did you respond to the pandemic?

Respondents attempted to cope with the pandemic in several ways, but mainly by revisiting connections with family, friends, and social media as afforded by the stay-at-home policies. Participants cited optimism, adaptation, productivity, helping others, and exploring new skills and interests as coping mechanisms they employed to regain a sense of agency and control over a situation that forced them to isolate and be cautious and pessimistic. The regarded these as positive outcomes of the pandemic.

- 43) At first I let the whole idea of it control me, it made me think that there was nothing to look forward to, nothing to expect, there was no light in the end of the tunnel. After I started to move on from that and tried stopping it from controlling my life, I looked at it as an opportunity to branch out on my skills, I started working out, spending as much time with my friends and family, I used social media more, I found an outlet and distraction from the anxiety of it all and just kept going, just like what BTS said, life goes on.
- 44) As the months went by, I decided to just look at this in a positive light in terms of how I got to spend more time with my family and donate to help those in need during these difficult times because I got to keep my work until Dec when a lot of people couldn't. It also helped my mental health knowing I was able to do something productive while at home.

Keeping up with the restrictive and anxiety-inducing conditions of the pandemic would not have been possible for some of the fans without their “discovery” of and continuous journey with BTS. Although the question did not specifically include BTS, the participants inserted the group in the

discussion, attesting to the important role of the group in their persistence in the middle of the lockdowns.

- 45) No choice but to follow the simple precautionary instructions. And I immersed myself more with the things I like — but mainly with BTS. Happy to say that I've officially converted our household into being Armys lol
- 46) No going out except for the most essential errands. Keeping track of important news. Helping from home the only way I can right now - spreading information and donating. Talking about BTS helps :))))))
- 47) Through being optimistic. Honestly, kung hindi dahil sa pandemya baka hindi ako naging fan ng BTS. Be updated on the news, ranted on Twitter, donated to causes that need it the most, listened to BTS music, checked up on my friends, etc.
- 48) I do several hobbies like dancing, exercising, watching BTS related content just to keep my mind off things.
- 49) At first, I resorted to art. I painted and practiced in my digital art. But when I « discovered » BTS, I really think I coped better.
- 50) At the first months, it really didn't sink in to me and I felt like I was just taking a break from my physical exhausting work. But as the lockdown got longer, I became frustrated. Really was. My plans were cancelled and I couldn't get out. But thank God, my family and I are all safe and healthy. I got mad as well (to the government in particular). But then after meeting BTS, I got busy with them that sometimes, I tend to forget that I am frustrated with all these lockdown extensions. They helped me get through.

6. *BTS and Mental Health: How did BTS affect your mental health?*

Just like the answers above on being fans of BTS, the participants noted that the music of BTS, with its capacity to uplift their mood, provide a sense of comfort, and boost their energy and “serotonin” in times when they needed it most, served as a key element that helped to improve their mental health condition.. Fans accessed the variety of music and content that BTS

provided that suited their current mood to make them constantly feel the presence of their idols

- 51) Proud to say that they've been my rock during these hard times. I like the fact that BTS helped me reconnect with my old friends. I also have this thing wherein I have my BTS song for the day, depending on my mood. Lol
- 52) Meron silang songs na nakaka-uplift ng mood kahit papaano. Or may araw na mas gusto ko lang maging malungkot, may kanta rin sila para dun. They're a companion in these dark days. *(They have songs that can somehow uplift [my mood]. Or when there are days when I just want to be sad, they still have songs for that...)*
- 53) [...] With their songs, they told me to keep on going even if I stumbled down. They told me to ignore those haters because they don't matter. They told me to be love on what I am because that's what I deserve. And a lot more.. Most of these came from their songs which became my healing.
- 54) All the content gives you something to look forward to! Times are very bleak now, just to be able to escape for a while and watch my favorite boys fight over petty prizes in Run BTS, or take a relaxing retreat - it's a great stress reliever. [...]
- 55) [...] I also feel that I am being encouraged to love myself and the very few times in my life when I've actually said that "I love myself" out loud was when I'm singing along to their songs. It's also helped that our fan community is so welcoming and passionate. It's given me a sense of belonging that I don't quite encounter anywhere else.
- 56) Extremely well. Even if I'm on the verge of a breakdown or suffering anxiety, all I need to do is to look at their pictures and my heart rate calms down.
- 57) Although I only became a fan last Sep, it really made a lot of changes in my mental health. I had something to look forward to especially when days are too long. I really enjoy their content, whether it is from BTS themselves or fan made. It has also been fun talking to my friends about BTS because there's such a wide

range of topic. I like how I have friends who share academic publications about them because it's such an interesting perspective. And reading them actually helps me with mental exercises. If I just want to relax and be happy, they also have content for that.

- 58) [...] Music is inspiring; some content are just for fun/laughs; there is a sense of community when I see and get involved with ARMY projects; their games such as BTSWorld is a good distraction.

The range of content cited from the group's complete discography including individual releases of the members, RUN BTS, Vlives, Instagram feed, news about BTS, pictures, YouTube fan edits, music videos, and their UN speech, among others, is a testament to the important role of digital media as an avenue for forging, maintaining, and improving social relations online. Digital intimacy was made possible between BTS and ARMY through timeless time and spaces of flows of network society, where distance and sequential time no longer applied in their traditional sense but in a network orientation where everything could be accessed simultaneously at any point (Castells, 2000, 696). Additionally, the participants felt even more connected with BTS and saw them more as friends/companions than just "superhuman idols," because as artists they were vocal about their own struggles with mental health and even the pandemic. They were perceived as going through the same things as their fans.

- 58) [...] Also, the way they acknowledge the fact that they are also going through what we're going through helped me feel that I am not alone, that we are all on the same situation.
- 59) I guess BTS is a form of catharsis - when I can't see the world (or rather, the choice is no longer mine, especially in this pandemic) i appreciate that BTS has taken extra steps to let their fans know that they are there and they know what we are feeling because they are the same. It makes ARMY feel part of something other than lock downs or quarantines
- 60) [...] Whenever I felt down, it was like they held their hand out to me and said that everything will be okay. Through their messages, their actions, their words, their speeches, their songs and their art, they helped me.

This digital relationship between BTS and ARMY was the “therapy” and “healing” that provided a boost of happiness and hope to Filipino fans while they battled against thoughts of self-hate, despair, and even suicide throughout the pandemic. True enough, some of the fans narrated how reading/listening to the BTS speech during their “anxiety attacks,” “depressive episodes,” and “breakdowns” was enough to calm them down and lift them up. Quotes 53 and 55 are only a few of the responses that cited BTS’ “love yourself” message as a crucial boon to their mental wellness. The statement below further elaborates on this reciprocal expression of support and inspiration between the fans and BTS.

- 61) they made me happy, like.... soooooo happy. like whenever i was sad, seeing their pictures, watching their videos and listening to their music just heals me immediately. they made me love myself in a way that no one could ever persuade me. it's funny right? even i can't persuade myself to love myself but they did it? 😂 i remember there was this saying where namjoon said in the concert (idk i forgot which one but yeah HAHHAHA) that army should use bts to love themselves because namjoon uses army to love himself and i think that's just the purest thing ever. i learned to love myself (well it's still ongoing) by loving bts, and i think that's really awesome.

7. BTS Fans and Mental Health: How did your individual activities and actions as a fan affect your mental health?

The individual activities and actions that the participants engaged in as fans of BTS served as a distraction from the bleak reality of the pandemic. By being occupied with tasks such as streaming, voting, and getting updated on the fandom over stan Twitter, the fans were able to focus on accomplishing things instead of dwelling on their problems and concerning themselves with the situation of the world around them. By being able to control something, they found an anchor that was constant, and had a sense of agency in a time of almost complete uncertainty.

- 62) It distracts me from the darkest part of reality. Although, aware na ko sa mga toxicity na nangyayari sa society natin and mas lalo na sa buhay ko, pero hindi ko na yun mina-mind nang madalas dahil mas pinapansin ko ang mga priorities ko para sa kanila

(like streaming and voting) na minsan, naging daily habit ko na yun and that became my greatest escape. *(Although I am aware of the toxicity of what's happening in our society and even my life, I no longer mind it often because I my attention is on my priorities for them (like streaming and voting) which are sometimes already a daily habit for me and that became my greatest escape.)*

- 63) It diverts my attention from my problems, and focus on votings and streaming.
- 64) It helped give me a distraction from the reality I was living in. I was in a constant state of being anxious of the state we were all in, everything was uncertain but they became the only thing that was constant in my life. This distraction helped me focus more on developing myself and growing. Through my individual activities and actions such as making edits and fan arts, it felt like a sense of purpose was realized in my life and it was like I had something good that I could do.
- 65) Though sometimes I can feel that at some point they're becoming a distraction (because I read fanfics or I scroll through Twitter to be updated while studying) still they kept me sane and going

Sometimes, the fans utilized these activities and actions that were already ingrained in their daily routine as rewards or breaks for accomplishing or failing certain tasks. The participants exhibited a high level of consciousness of the positive effects and potential drawbacks of their engagement in the fandom. They recognized the various ways that their actions could affect their well-being, and adjusted accordingly by putting themselves in conducive situations that would provide them the greatest benefit.

- 66) Every time I finished a topic in review I reward myself with any BTS online content. Their hardwork also inspires me.
- 67) Kapag nag aaral ako at walang maintindihan, nanonood na lang ako ng Bangtan videos. But still they still inspire me to chase my dreams and do things that will benefit me kaya nagagawa ko ang mga assignment ko after ko manood sa kanila. *(When I am studying and I can no longer understand anything, I just watch Bangtan videos.*

But they still inspire me to chase my dreams and do things that will benefit me that's why I am able to do my assignments after watching them.)

- 68) Though there were sleepless night reading au's, update, streaming, interacting and watching tour concerts but I still manage to fulfil my daily routine.
- 69) Like I said, if you're able to control it, being ARMY is great. I use it as a reward for especially tough days (e.g., if I finish 3 writeups, I can watch Run tonight). As a reward system, it just gives you a little push. Or I will play their songs on repeat while doing repetitive tasks to help me finish. It's also given me something to strive for - I'm learning Korean to understand their songs better. New skills are great for mental health.

The participatory nature of the BTS ARMY fandom enacted on a digital space has been interpreted as a kind of affective labor, or "labor that produces emotions like excitement, passion, ease, and happiness" (Hardt, 1999, as cited in George, 2020), which could be exploited by culture industries profiting from their effort. However, the subjective experience of fans as illustrated by these quotes presented a more eudaimonic and therapeutic act for the self.

- 70) Writing has always been an outlet for me and now that I have my muses, it's been an extremely good way for me to release stress. I noticed that I get antsy and anxious though if I am unable to write for a long time but I think that's more because I deprive myself of my outlet because of the amount of work I have to do.

8. *BTS ARMY Fandom and Mental Health: How did your involvement with BTS ARMY affect your mental health?*

Social belonging, empathy, and participation went hand in hand in the narrative of fans about their involvement in the ARMY fandom. Stan Twitter is a term used to refer to the virtual space created on Twitter where most fandoms interact through fan accounts, in contrast to personal accounts, dedicated primarily to activities and posts related to the groups they support. By seeing other ARMYs and interacting with them in various social networking sites, the participants felt less lonely as a part of a community of people who shared not only the same interest and admiration for BTS but also similar experiences regardless of their cultural, linguistic, gender, and other identifying backgrounds. Participants also noted how friends

within the ARMY fandom, old and new, accommodated topics outside of the fandom and even problems experienced in each other's personal lives without judgement. They pointed out that relationships were formed not only as fans of the same idols but as individuals who were included in each other's support systems.

- 71) alam kong marami ring tulad ko na nahihirapan sa buhay at nakakakuha ng lakas ng loob tuwing nanonood ng mga video ng bts. nakakarinig ako ng mga kwento nila at halos pareho lang ang mga sitwasyon namin na tuwing nawawalan kami ng tiwala sa aming mga sarili nandiyan lagi ang bts para ipaalala samin ang aming self-worth. naging support system para sa akin ang army at lagi ako natutuwa makipag-usap sa kanila (*I know that there are a lot of people like me who are struggling in life who also find inner strength through watching videos of BTS. I get to listen to their stories and our almost similar experiences of losing trust in oneself and always having BTS around to remind us of our self-worth. ARMYs have become a support system for me and I always become happy just by talking to them.*)
- 72) Being involved with ARMY makes me feel less lonely. With ARMYs I would feel more comfortable, outgoing, and confident with talking to other people. So my mental health becomes better each day I connect with other ARMYs.
- 73) There are some ARMYs that I followed who are very sweet and touching. Despite of our aggressiveness, we all fight for our common goal - that is to give BTS on what they truly deserve, to be on the top. And best part of it was the unity we had, in which we understand and helped each other through by any means: physiologically, socially, physically, and even mentally, emotionally and psychologically.
- 74) it made me happy 😊 seeing that there's really a lot of people supporting bts makes me happy 😊 and also, seeing fellow armys goof around made me happy HAHHAHAHA especially when they're so chaotic, loud and active in twitter 😂
- 75) BTS has enabled me to make more online friends and support systems, and discussions with them are

always very eye opening as we do not only connect as army, but as individual people as well. These are people who I have met online who check up on me from time to time and even ask how I am when things like natural disasters or political issues arise in the country. I have met people from all around the world with different ethnicities, nationalities, religions, gender expressions, identities, and a lot more. This diversity is always something that reminds me to continue learn and keep an open mind in whatever I do. The only downside is that there will always be the occasional and general toxic behavior found online which negatively affects my mental health at times, but aside from that, everything else about being an army has been positively affecting me.

Notwithstanding the positive impacts of involvement in BTS ARMY, the participants generally agreed that some other ARMYs can be very “toxic,” or overly competitive, intense, or aggressive in their way of supporting BTS and engaging in “fan wars” with fans of other groups. To address this problem, some fans distanced themselves from stan Twitter altogether, avoided “toxic” fans by curating the accounts they were following or accounts following them, or decided to temporarily leave or stayed only to focus on ARMY common goals true to the ideals of BTS. The process of compartmentalization of personal and fandom life and interactions between online ARMY friends and personal/in-real-life friends that some participants reported as coping mechanisms for their mental health were a steady reality in network society where inclusions and exclusions always came together.

- 76) I actually feel scared sometimes because some ARMYs are too intense, so I make sure to avoid those toxic people because it really spoils the fun of being a BTS fan when you encounter fans who get so unreasonable. That’s why I also don’t engage with online discussions and prefer talking about them with friends.
- 77) i honestly don’t know if it had a positive/negative impact to my mental health. because fanwars always make my anxiety worse, which happens a lot within the fandom. however, if it’s just bts we’re talking about, they help me view life as more tragically beautiful than just plain cruel.

- 78) To be honest, ARMY is one of the most toxic fandom in kpop. However, I don't really engage myself much about fanwars and such because I call myself an ARMY simply because I love & support BTS no matter what. It's frustrating sometimes whenever I read something about fanwars involving other ARMYs, but often times I just shrug it off since I know some of them are still immature.
- 79) I realized that they are not toxic after all. In every fandom, there will always be that toxic person. But it so happened that BTS is composed of millions of fans, so there are a lot of toxics. BUT the more respectful, responsible, open-minded, etc. fans outnumber them.

BTS ARMY affiliation exhibited key characteristics of volatility in network society as entry into the fandom can be considered relatively easy. At the same time, it coupled with negotiations in terms of social belongingness. In the first question, some participants mentioned a need to familiarize first with BTS and their content before one can identify as an ARMY. Conversely, in the last question about their involvement in the fandom, others felt the need to exclude themselves from the community in order to avoid "toxic" fan behavior. This shows that the participatory culture of affiliation in the BTS ARMY fandom can be ambiguous at best in its effect on fan mental health. The same can be said of the question on expression where the different forms of engagement that fans perform are caught between tensions of their personal/professional life and fandom life.

But for the active fans with their own "stan accounts," their supportive actions for the fulfilment of fandom goals and creative content contributions translated to a high sense of purpose, control, and agency. Incidentally, they are also presented better opportunities for collaborative-problem solving by being a part of different networks where content, updates, and creative works are created and shared. However, there were a few fans who remained apprehensive about interacting with other ARMYs and considered them more as threats to mental health. In terms of circulation, the fandom exhibited a strong capacity to dominate digital networks by the sheer number of their members and the connections they maintain with one another. To fans seeking to remain updated on their idols, circulation is perhaps the participatory culture that best contribute3s to improving ARMY mental health.

Conclusions

The quantitative results showed that fans belonging to official and unofficial fan clubs registered higher identification, participation, and well-being scores compared to non-affiliated fans. Statistical correlations, however, showed fandom identification and participation having no significant effects on well-being. One reason for this inconsistency might be the incompatibility of the scale used for digital fan communities within a participatory culture framework. At present, no existing quantitative scale specifically accommodates digital and K-pop fandoms that subscribe to a qualitatively different culture than most popular Western fandoms.

Although more nuanced and complex than initially conceived in the hypothesis, the qualitative responses still indicated a more positive relationship between female Filipino fans' identification and participation in the BTS ARMY fandom and their mental well-being during the pandemic. Identifying with BTS as artists who are genuine people too and with ARMYs as friends who share the same experiences, the fans allowed for digital intimacy that transcended time and space, and a support system that practiced a relational and collective way of coping during the pandemic. Their participation through expression, collaborative problem solving, and circulation enabled them to perform their agency online despite crippling constraints imposed on them by their life offline.

The diversity of respondents in terms of age, economic reality, occupation, and time of exposure to the fandom contributed greatly to the disparate experiences they had in relation to the pandemic, BTS, their personal life, and other ARMYs. This research is limited in many ways and cannot claim a causal relationship between fan identity and well-being, let alone generalize for the population of female Filipino fans of BTS. As an exploratory study, it managed to open even more potential research topics such as on the effects of BTS content on fan mental health, the social consequences of becoming a fan of BTS, the co-optation of fan creative works by culture industries, and the effects of fan activism and social action on mental health, among others.

For future research, the study recommends a replication of this kind of inquiry but with a more representative population of male and females, a more specific generational segmentation, and updated measures suited for digital fandoms. It also recommends the further exploration of the potential of participatory culture in bringing about positive social change and the limits of its influence. Castells (2021) warns of the counter-progressive forces that utilize the social networks of network society and Jenkins (2006) similarly encourages us to resist against the attempts of market and the state to censor and pathologize emerging participatory cultures.

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APPENDICES

Modified Fan Identity Scale	
Enthusiasm	
Using the scale below, please indicate the following: 1 <i>Not at all</i> 2 3 4 5 <i>Very much</i>	
1.	How much do you love BTS?
2.	How passionate are you about BTS?
3.	How big a fan of BTS would you say you are?
Appreciation	
Using the scale below, please indicate how much you agree with the following statements: 1 <i>Not at all</i> 2 3 4 5 <i>Very much</i>	
4.	BTS is relevant to my life.
5.	BTS has helped me grow as a person.
6.	BTS helps me think about the things I value.
Social Interaction	
Using the scale below, please indicate how much you agree with the following: 1 <i>Strongly disagree</i> 2 3 4 5 <i>Strongly agree</i>	
7.	I often talk about BTS with a friend.
8.	I often email/text/private message with another fan about BTS.
9.	I have friends who are also fans of BTS.

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Modified Participatory Scale	
<p>Using the scale below, rate the following activities in terms of how much you enjoy doing each of them.</p> <p>For each item we ask whether or not you have experienced this. If you have, answer about that experience, and if you have not, answer in terms of how much you would like to have that experience. I enjoy:</p> <p>1 <i>Not at all</i> 2 3 4 5 <i>Very much</i></p>	
1.	Reading about BTS.
2.	Visiting websites about BTS.
3.	Participating in online discussions about BTS.
4.	Posting items on social media about BTS.
5.	Going to conventions or other gatherings that feature BTS.
6.	Attending an event dressed following the fashion style of a BTS member.
7.	Being a member of a fan organization or group about BTS.
8.	Keeping up with the latest information about BTS.
9.	Keeping up with the latest information about BTS.
10.	Writing fanfiction about BTS.
11.	Reading fanfiction about BTS.
12.	Creating fan art, videos, etc. about BTS.
13.	Watching/seeing fan art, videos, etc. about BTS.

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BBC Subjective Well-Being Scale	
Using the scale below, please select the answer from one of five options that best describes your experience: 1 <i>Not at all</i> 2 <i>A little</i> 3 <i>Moderately</i> 4 <i>Very much</i> 5 <i>Extremely</i>	
1.	Are you happy with your physical health?
2.	Are you happy with the quality of your sleep?
3.	Are you happy with your ability to perform daily living activities?
4.	Do you feel depressed or anxious?
5.	Do you feel able to enjoy life?
6.	Do you feel you have a purpose in life?
7.	Do you feel optimistic about the future?
8.	Do you feel in control of your life?
9.	Do you feel happy with yourself as a person?
10.	Are you happy with your looks and appearance?
11.	Do you feel able to live your life the way you want?
12.	Are you confident in your opinion and beliefs?
13.	Do you feel able to do the things you choose to do?
14.	Do you feel able to grow and develop as a person?
15.	Are you happy with yourself and your achievements?
16.	Are you happy with your personal and family life?
17.	Are you happy with your friendships and personal relationships?
18.	Are you comfortable about the way you relate and connect with others?
19.	Are you happy with your sex life?
20.	Are you able to ask someone for help with a problem?
21.	Are you happy that you have enough money to meet your needs?
22.	Are you happy with your opportunity for exercise/leisure?
23.	Are you happy with your access to health services?
24.	Are you happy with your ability to work?

Open-Ended Survey Questions

BTS Fan Involvement

1. How were you introduced to BTS?
2. Why are you an ARMY or a fan of BTS?
3. How involved are you with the fandom and what activities do you engage in as a member of the BTS fandom?

COVID-19 and Mental Health

4. How did the coronavirus pandemic affect your life?
5. How did you respond to the pandemic?

BTS and Mental Health

6. How did BTS affect your mental health?
7. How did your individual activities and actions as a BTS fan affect your mental health?
8. How did your involvement in BTS ARMY affect your mental health?

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